

The Right Touch

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Ajaan Fuang once said that he owed a lot to Ajaan Lee because Ajaan Lee had shown him the brightness of life. By that, he meant the four noble truths. We don't think of the four noble truths as brightness. The typical picture is that they're pessimistic—they're all about suffering, suffering, suffering—but that typical picture is really wrong. The truths pinpoint exactly where the suffering is. It's in an activity we do. That means it's something we can learn how to stop doing. So, it's good news.

There's also a cause for what we're doing, and we can learn how to stop that as well. When you're focused on stopping the cause, that's how you give rise to the cessation of suffering. That's the positive part. That's the brightness.

But the brightness isn't only in the third noble truth; it's also in the fourth, that the way to put an end to suffering involves nothing but good activities. We chant that again and again and again: “admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end.” Think about the path: It speaks to our better natures.

In the actual doing of the path, we develop our independence in terms of how we observe things. That's another point that Ajaan Fuang would often talk about. When you meditate, you've got to be observant. You're not just going through the motions. You have to look at what you're doing and notice what's going right, what's going wrong.

Then, as he would say, you use your ingenuity to figure a way out. He commented one time on how we have this advantage, that we have so many teachings of the ajaans written out—all their Dhamma talks, treatises by some of the ajaans explaining meditation in great detail. When he started out, though, it was all very simple.

“Meditate to get your mind down”: That was the first meditation instruction he received. So, he struggled with that for a while: What does it mean to get your mind down? So, he got it down, down, down, and it got very heavy. So, he realized on his own: “This can't be right.” He said, “If down isn't going to help, what about 'up, up, up, up, up, up'?” Then he found the point of “just right,” trying to get the mind to settle in. As you use your powers of observation, you become more sensitive.

He commented one time on how the commentaries say that breath meditation is the meditation method that's good for everybody. He said, “That's

not the case; it's good for people who are precise in their powers of observation." If your powers of observation are crude, all you see is just the in, out, in, out, in, out, and that's about it. Or, you push things around so much that you can actually make the body more unpleasant.

You've got to learn a light touch—a light but steady touch, so that you can develop a quality of just right. We're not here to do only "right" mindfulness or "right" concentration; we're trying for "just right" mindfulness or "just right" concentration. Think in *those* terms. Think in terms of balance.

The image in the Canon is of a person holding a baby quail in his hand. If he holds it too tightly, the quail's going to die; if he holds it too loosely, the quail's going to fly away. So, you have to figure out just the right amount of pressure. It's like catching the hummingbirds when they get into the multi-kuti. If you were to squeeze them, they'd die. But if you don't hold them firmly enough, they just slip through your fingers and you've got to catch them again.

So, try to figure out: What is the right touch in terms of the pressure of your concentration—in terms of how much you want to actively move the breath energy around—and to what extent do you want to simply *think* that the breath can go, and let the power of the perception do all the work? In other words, don't put any pressure on the breath. Be there just enough so that you don't leave the breath, but don't squeeze it.

After all, we're trying to get a sense of fullness. If we squeeze the breath in pushing it around, it's not going to feel full. Or, if you squeeze the breath between the in-breath and the out-breath to mark, "Well, now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out," that doesn't allow a sense of fullness to develop, either.

The Buddha left it as kind of a riddle—you could almost say it was a koan: "Train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture. Train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure." But where is the potential for rapture? Where is the potential for pleasure? It's here in the body. Give it some space. Give it the opportunity to show itself, instead of squeezing it around, and you'll find it is something you can become sensitive to.

In this way, concentration is not simply a matter of brute force. It's tranquility and insight working together. You stay focused on one thing and then you're very clear about what you're doing—and the results that you're getting.

This is why, when the Buddha taught Rahula the beginning of the Dhamma, after he'd established the principle of being truthful, the second lesson was on how to be observant. Be clear about what your intentions are, be clear about what you're doing based on those intentions, and then be clear about the results.

That's how you learn the Dhamma. You don't learn it by reading books or going online and reading all the suttas. Remember that one of the meanings of the word "Dhamma" is "action." So, you're going to be learning the Dhamma in action by developing the right touch.

When you're gentle but firm in your concentration, things will open up in the body that would otherwise stay closed. It's as if different parts of your body are associated with the different parts of your psyche, and some of them don't want to open up because they've seen that you've run roughshod over them in the past. They don't trust you. You've got to show that you're trustworthy, and you do that by having the right touch. Let the breath work gently, and have a lot of patience.

"Patience" here doesn't mean just putting up with things; it means sticking with something that requires your full attention and your full sensitivity and not giving up, but also not squeezing things to hurry up the results.

So, try to bring the right touch to your meditation. Observe what you're doing and, if things aren't going well, try to use your ingenuity. Exactly where are you putting unnecessary pressure on things? Try to catch yourself in the act.

There are so many ways that we subconsciously deal with the breath energies in the body. What we're trying to do as we meditate is to bring them out into the open. In the past, we may not have had, the concept of "breath energies," but we do have a sense of "energies," and sometimes we bottle them up because we're afraid of them. We feel threatened by them. Or we're trying to protect them. So, as we practice, we need to develop the right touch that allows these things to open up, so that we can get that sense of full-body awareness. We can inhabit the body in any part we want.

After all, if *you* can't stay in your body, *who's* going to stay in your body? You want this to be your territory; you don't want other people's energies to invade. So, become sensitive to how you're working with the energies already, try to notice where you're doing it in an unskillful way, and remind yourself, "There must be another way."

Think of Ajaan Fuang. Nobody told him that he had to bring his mind back up, but he had an instinctive sense: This was not right, getting it down, down, down.

It's in this way that your discernment develops. It doesn't develop from lots of words; it develops from your sensitivity—your sensitivity to cause and effect. And that's developed by trying to make the causes as good as you can, so that the effects really are satisfactory. That's the kind of discernment we want.